

The Limitations of Asceticism

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This article discusses the limitations and advantages of using ›asceticism‹ as a universal category and as a hermeneutic tool in the study of late antique religious life and comparative studies of religious communities. It first explores the roots and the history of the terms ›asceticism‹, ›Askese‹ and ›ascétisme‹ arguing that they originate from early modern scholarly traditions rather than being based on the language of late antique and early medieval Christian texts. A second part traces the origins of the term *askēsis* in Greek monastic discourse, using the *Vita Antonii*, the *Historia Lausiaca*, Theodoret's *Historia religiosa* and the Greek and Latin versions of the *Vita Pachomii* as case studies. I argue that Athanasius of Alexandria's decision to use *askēsis* as a key term of his monastic program was motivated by limiting the range of appropriate religious practices rather than praising what we might call radical asceticism. *Askēsis* took on a life of its own and attained various meanings in Greek monastic texts but never found an equivalent in Latin monastic language. The third part describes the diversification of ›ascetic‹ practices and ideals in a number of Latin hagiographic and normative texts. I question to what extent it makes sense to consider religious practices emerging in the West (following a rule, unconditional obedience, humility, enclosure, sexual abstinence, liturgical discipline, etc.) as forms of Western ›asceticism‹ and argue that using ›asceticism‹ uncritically carries the danger of obfuscating nuances, diversity and transformations of religious practices in the Latin (but also in the Greek) world of Late Antiquity and the early Middle Ages.

Key words: asceticism, hagiography, monastic rules, humanist scholarship, Athanasius, Theodoret of Cyrrus, Antony (the desert father), Palladius, late antique and early medieval monasticism

This contribution is the result of a slight unease about the use of the term ›asceticism‹, even though it seems to be entirely unavoidable when studying the late antique and early medieval religious worlds and for any comparative study of religious practices across periods, regions, and cultures. Not talking about ›asceticism‹, not calling those who choose to place their own body in the center of their religious practices ›ascetics‹, and not calling these practices ›ascetic‹ would be, for a scholar of a religion, like playing Taboo on an advanced level; it would lead to tedious circumlocutions and paraphrases and shut down cross-disciplinary and cross-cultural scopes.¹

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1 This contribution expands upon a short essay on ›asceticism‹ to be published in the *Routledge Medieval Encyclopedia Online*. Research for this article was conducted as a contribution to the Austrian Science Fund (FWF): F42-G18 Visions of Community. I would like to thank Julian Hendrix and the anonymous peer reviewers for their very helpful comments and suggestions and Harrison Allen for his assistance in finalizing the footnotes. Currently the best critical reflection on asceticism in early Christian studies and the history of scholarship on asceticism is Rebecca Krawiec's essay Asceticism. Krawiec takes a slightly different approach by taking the assumption of an ›abstract concept‹ of asceticism as a point of departure, seeing it as an ›analytical tool‹, assuming that there was a shared ›ascetic discourse‹ and discussing various possible definitions.

My unease with ›asceticism‹ will therefore not lead to the argument that we should eradicate the term from our shared scholarly language, but I hope that I can turn this unease into something productive that opens avenues for new inquiries. One side of it, which applies not just to ›asceticism‹ but to many other key terms and categories in the study of religions, is fueled by the fact that most of them have a purely Christian pedigree that shapes their meanings and implications. Applying them outside of the context of Christianity inevitably forces us to look at other religions and their cultural frameworks through a Christian lens. Calling, for example, Buddhist monasteries ›monasteries‹ and Buddhist monks ›monks‹ carries the danger of misunderstanding their religious practices, their motivations and their role in society at large.

If we, to use a different example, apply shared Western notions of *religion*, *faith* and *piety* to Christian Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages, we enter a dangerous terrain of anachronisms; if we apply them to the Classical world, we might already be completely lost in translation.² How much more is this the case if we uncritically use *religion*, *faith* and *piety* outside the Western and the Judeo-Christian-Islamic context? Conversely, there are very few cases in which terms and concepts that originated in non-Christian cultures became part of the language of religious studies, such as *taboo* and *fetish*. Using them as hermeneutic tools to understand Christianity still sounds like a provocation – as much as it makes sense.³ My unease with ›asceticism‹ goes further: we talk about ›asceticism‹ as a universal concept *as if* we use it with a shared understanding across disciplines and *as if* we speak the language of our sources. So there is another opportunity for getting lost in translation, to confuse source evidence with scholarly analysis and to be at cross purposes whenever talking to someone of a neighboring discipline.

I will elaborate on this unease in three reflections. The first one examines the supposedly Christian pedigree of ›asceticism‹ and shows that the expression itself is shaped by various early modern, modern and contemporary scholarly traditions rather than being rooted in late antique and early medieval sources or simply derived from the classical Greek term ἄσκησις (*askēsis*).⁴ The second reflection focusses on the role of the expression ἄσκησις in Greek Christian texts and the difficulties in translating the term into Latin. Athanasius of Alexandria's decision to integrate the classical Greek term ἄσκησις into Christian monastic discourse was, as I would argue, part of his strategy for domesticating and utilizing Egyptian religious movements. Once established, the term took on a life of its own and developed a broad range of meanings in Greek sources but never received a Latin equivalent in Western monastic texts. The third reflection is an attempt to describe the diversity of monastic practices and their underlying theological rationales in early medieval Latin sources. It raises the question to what extent ›asceticism‹ forms a useful hermeneutic tool for understanding the emergence of Eastern and Western monasticism(s). All three reflections point to questions that primarily pertain to Christian religious life in the late antique and early medieval period but that might be productively transferred and adapted to studying religious communities outside the Christian sphere.

2 A classical study addressing this problem is Veyne, *Did the Greeks believe in their myths?*

3 On taboo, see Steiner, *Taboo, truth and religion*; on the fetish: Kohl, *Die Macht der Dinge*; Pietz, *Problem of the fetish*. I-IIIa; Antenhofer (ed.), *Fetisch als heuristische Kategorie*.

4 For overviews on the history of ›asceticism‹ see Wimbush and Valantasis, *Introduction*; Graiver, *Asceticism of the Mind*.

I.

A word search on the string *ascetic** in the *Patrologia Latina* database provides 251 hits in 122 documents – a fairly widespread term, so it seems. If we click on ›exclude apparatus‹ and ›medieval authors only‹, 21 hits in 11 documents remain, and all of them point to erroneously labeled introductions to primary sources. A word search in the digital *Monumenta Germaniae Historica* leads to similar results: no traces in the sources themselves, occasional use in introductions and footnotes. There is no *monachus asceticus*, no *uita ascetica*, and there are no *opera ascetica* mentioned in medieval texts. The initial number of hits in the *Patrologia Latina* database shows, however, that *asceticus* became a widely used descriptive term in early modern scholarship and one of the key terms of the master narrative about the origins of Christian monastic life that present scholarship tries to complicate.⁵ The expression *asceticus*, thus, does not generalize and abstract a late antique or early medieval ›ascetic‹ practice (which would in itself be problematic) but it superimposes an artificial label on a world that might have perceived itself as indefinitely diverse and not at all guided by a universal principle of what scholars from the early modern period onwards called ›uita ascetica‹.

The roots of ›asceticism‹, the French ›ascétisme‹ and the German ›Askese‹ are to be found in the works of seventeenth-century Latin-writing scholars and their attempts to order and edit the wealth of source material of the late antique and medieval world and to read them as historical and theological sources.⁶ Scholars like Heribert Rosweyde (d. 1629), Nicolas-Hugues Ménard (d. 1664), Jean Bolland (d. 1665) and Jean Mabillon (d. 1707) not only gave us access to the wealth of late antique and medieval Latin Christian texts but they still have an impact on how we read and understand them.

Initially, the adjective *asceticus* did not refer to groups and individuals, forms of life, practices, or places, but it emerged in the process of translating, editing, and categorizing sources: the *opera ascetica* of patristic authors, *sermones asceticae* or *epistolae asceticae*. As an instrument for creating order and defining genres, it inevitably became a lens through which we read and understand texts – just like the new titles and chapter divisions that humanist scholars quite often imposed on many late antique and medieval texts when editing them for the first time. It is virtually impossible to get rid of them in subsequent editions.

One of the oldest witnesses (possibly the oldest one) of the term *asceticus* is a Latin translation of Basil's Ἀσκητικόν (the Greek version of his monastic rules) from 1540, which is titled *Diui Basilij Magni Archiepiscopi Caesariensis moralia; Ascetica magna; Ascetica parua*.⁷ *Asceticus* was thus initially a Latinization of the Greek adjective ἀσκητικόν (*askētikon*), a word that does not appear in Classical Greek sources. It is thus only indirectly related to the Classical Greek term ἄσκησις.

5 See Rapp and Diem, *Monastic laboratory*, and various other contributions to the forthcoming *Cambridge History of Western Monasticism* edited by Beach and Cochelin.

6 A first introduction to these pioneering endeavors, especially the work of the Bollandists and the Maurists, is provided by Knowles, *Great Historical Enterprises*.

7 *Diui Basilij Magni Archiepiscopi Caesariensis moralia; Ascetica magna; Ascetica parua*, ed. Gryphius. Accessed on 26 April 2019: digibug.ugr.es/handle/10481/11770.

Asceticus became subsequently not only a genre description of late antique Greek and Latin texts pertaining to rigorous Christian life, but also of those texts that claim to continue these traditions into the medieval period.⁸ It became an instrument to intimate that the ideals of the desert fathers were by no means abandoned throughout the Middle Ages.⁹ A case in point would be the twelve volumes of Bernard Pez's *Bibliotheca ascetica antiquo-nova, hoc est: collectio veterum quorundam et recentiorum opusculorum asceticorum, quae hucusque in variis mss, codicibus et bibliothecis delituerunt*, which was published between 1723 and 1740.¹⁰ None of the texts in Pez's collection are late antique or early medieval; they are products of various reform movements reaching into his own time. As such, they form part of an argument of unbroken continuity made in response to the challenges of the Reformation on the one hand and the Counterreformation on the other.¹¹

Later on, various loan words derived from *asceticus* were adopted in vernacular languages – particularly in French. The first volume of Diderot's *Encyclopédie* (1751) has a lemma on *ascétique*, which traces the term back to Basil's work but also refers to a group of ›ascetes‹ [sic] and to a *vie ascétique* showing that not only the adjective but also the noun had been established in French at that time.¹² The first edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* (1771) contains a short lemma on ›Ascetics‹.¹³ Johann Heinrich Zedler's *Grosses vollständiges Universal-Lexicon aller Wissenschaften und Künste* (1731-1754), however, does not yet contain the lemmas *Asket* or *Askese*.¹⁴ Neither does the first Volume of *Grimm's Wörterbuch* from 1854.

Jacques-Paul Migne's monumental project to make the Greek and Latin patristic heritage along with its scholarly introductions available to a broad clerical readership in the affordable volumes of the *Patrologia Latina* (1844-1855) and the *Patrologia Graeca* (1856-1858) played a key role in turning the study of the desert fathers and the first monks into

8 An early example would be Pierre Poussines, *Thesaurus asceticus* (Paris, 1634), which contains, among others, works of John Chrysostom, Macarius the Great, Theodor Studite and the *Apophthegmata Patrum* in Greek and in Latin translation.

9 See, for example, Negrone, *De cura minimorum*.

10 Pez, *Bibliotheca ascetica antiquo-nova*.

11 On Pez, see Wallnig, *Gasthaus der Gelehrsamkeit*; Wallnig, et al. (eds.), *Europäische Geschichtskulturen*.

12 Diderot, *Encyclopédie*, vol. 1, 750b: »Ascétique, adj. qui concerne les Ascetes. On a donné ce titre à plusieurs livres de piété qui renferment des exercices spirituels, tels que les *ascétiques* ou *traité de dévotion* de S. Basile, évêque de Césarée en Cappadoce. Dans les bibliothèques on range sous le titre d'*ascétiques* tous les écrits de Théologie mystique : on dit aussi la *vie ascétique*, pour exprimer les exercices d'oraison & de mortification que doit pratiquer un religieux. Voyez MYSTIQUE. La *vie ascétique* des anciens fideles consistoit, selon M. Fleury, à pratiquer volontairement tous les exercices de la pénitence. Les Ascetes s'enfermoient d'ordinaire dans des maisons, où ils vivoient en grande retraite, gardant la continence, & ajoutant à la frugalité chrétienne des abstinences & des jeûnes extraordinaires. Ils pratiquoient la xérophagie ou nourriture seche, & les jeûnes renforcés de deux ou trois jours de suite, ou plus longs encore. Ils s'exerçoient à porter le cilice, à marcher nuds piés, à dormir sur la terre, à veiller une grande partie de la nuit, lire assiduellement l'Écriture-sainte, & prier le plus continuellement qu'il étoit possible. Telle étoit la *vie ascétique* : de grands évêques & de fameux docteurs, entre autres Origene, l'avoient menée. On nommoit par excellence ceux qui la pratiquoient, les élus entre les élus, ἐκλεκτῶν ἐκλεκτότεροι. Clément Alexandrin, Eusebe, *hist. lib. VI. c. iij.* Fleury, *mœurs des Chrétiens, II. part. n°. 26.* Bingham, *orig. eccles. lib. VII. c. j. §. 6. (G).*« Accessed 4 June 2019: enccre.academie-sciences.fr/encyclopedia/article/v1-3164-0/.

13 *Encyclopedia Britannica*, vol. 1, 419: »ASCETICS, in church-history, such Christians in the primitive church as inured themselves to great degrees of abstinence and fasting, in order to subdue their passions«.

14 Accessed on 4 June 2019: www.zedler-lexikon.de.

the study of ascétisme.¹⁵ A *Dictionnaire d'Ascétisme* was published in 1865 by the monks Jean Claude Gainet and J. Clovis Poussin in Migne's publishing house.¹⁶ Firmly embedded in Catholic scholarly traditions, as markers of religious practices, of a period, of a theology, and a genre, in nineteenth-century French scholarship *ascétisme* held an unequivocally positive connotation and it is firmly a part of Catholic church history. Aside from the lemma on *gnosis*, the *Dictionnaire d'Ascétisme* does not contain any entry that pertains to religious practice outside a Catholic Christian tradition. The *Revue d'ascétique et de mystique*, which was founded in 1920 and lasted until 1971, published exclusively on matters pertaining to Christianity. It serves as a witness of this unbroken tradition,¹⁷ as does the massive lemma on ›Ascèse/Asétisme‹ in the *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité* from 1937 which praises ascétisme as an essential aspect of Christian tradition and theology with ›pagan‹ roots, rather than an object of comparative religious studies that would address non-Western and non-classical religious traditions.¹⁸

English ›asceticism‹ and the German ›Askese‹ have a slightly different history. It was probably the Protestant historian Otto Zöckler (d. 1906) who established *Askese* as an object of historical research in his *Kritische Geschichte der Askese* (first published in 1863, revised under the title *Askese und Mönchtum* in 1897).¹⁹ Unlike the French scholarly tradition, Zöckler put an emphasis on the roots of *Askese* in classical philosophical and in Jewish tradition, addressed ›asceticism‹ outside the boundaries of orthodoxy and in non-Christian religions, and approached it with a scholarly and critical distance, with a stronger emphasis on its negative aspects (renunciation, negation, and punishment of the body etc.), and as a phenomenon of religious history rather than as an essential part of a Christian tradition and identity. Anglo-Saxon scholarship approached ›asceticism‹ with a similar critical distance, which made it possible to apply the concept outside of Christian or even Western contexts and to turn it into a corner stone of comparative religious studies.²⁰

One of the earliest philosophical works that addresses ›asceticism‹ outside a purely religious context is the third treatise of Friedrich Nietzsche's *Zur Genealogie der Moral* (1887) on ›Was bedeuten asketische Ideale‹ (What is the meaning of ascetic ideals), which discusses the limitations of the artistic, philosophical, priestly and rationalist pursuit of ›ascetic‹ ideals.²¹ Max Weber's *Protestantische Ethik und der Geist des Kapitalismus* (German 1920; English 1930; French 1964)²² led to a surge of publications on *Askese* and ›asceticism‹ in various academic disciplines but also in non-scholarly venues. It became a category of research in fields outside history, theology and religious studies and, at least partly, dissociated from its

15 On Migne's work, see Bloch, *God's Plagiarist*.

16 *Dictionnaire d'ascétisme* ed. Gainet and Poussin.

17 The journal was published as *Revue d'ascétique et de mystique* until 1971. From 1972-1977 the journal was published as *Revue d'histoire de la Spiritualité*.

18 De Guibert *et al.*, ›Ascèse/aséticisme‹.

19 Zöckler, *Kritische Geschichte der Askese*; Zöckler, *Askese und Mönchtum*.

20 See, for example, Campbell, *The Mystics, Ascetics, and Saints of India*; Hardman, *Ideals of Asceticism*.

21 Nietzsche, *Zur Genealogie der Moral*, 355-430.

22 Weber, *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Religionssoziologie*; *The Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism*, transl. by Parsons; Weber, *L'Éthique protestante*.

purely religious context. Anna Freud, for example, identified an ›ascetic phase‹ in adolescent development.²³ Michel Foucault and Geoffrey Harpham identified ›asceticism‹ as a primary technique of the self and as a constituting element of Western societies and their perceptions of the body.²⁴ Vincent L. Wimbush and Richard Valantasis established ›asceticism‹ as a key category of cultural studies ranging from comparative religious studies to postmodernism in a massive edited volume published in 1995.²⁵ Their approach of ›asceticism‹ as a universal cultural phenomenon required definitions of ›asceticism‹ as broad as that of Geoffrey Harpham, as »any act of self-denial undertaken as a strategy of empowerment or gratification«²⁶ or Richard Valantasis: »performances within a dominant social environment intended to inaugurate a new subjectivity, different social relations and an alternative symbolic universe«.²⁷ Virtually every written language contains today a loanword that is based on ›asceticism‹, Askese or ascétisme.²⁸

Meanwhile, scholars of late antique and early medieval religious life published various standard works that carry the words ›asceticism‹ or ›ascetics‹ in their titles, such as those of Susan Ashbrook-Harvey,²⁹ David Brakke,³⁰ Patricia Cox Miller,³¹ James Goehring,³² Richard Goodrich,³³ Hannah Hunt,³⁴ Conrad Leyser,³⁵ Philip Rousseau,³⁶ and most recently Inbar Graiver.³⁷ Most of these works use ›asceticism‹ as a broad marker of late antique or early medieval religious – especially monastic – practice, but do not discuss the term and its etymology or question whether ›asceticism‹ indeed works as a universal concept. ›Asceticism‹ is, thus, used as a place holder and a convenient description of the diversity of late antique religious practices – keeping together what seems to belong together. But it might be worthwhile to deliberately avoid working with this supposedly universal concept (with its crooked genealogy) that created a unity ever since humanist scholars labeled the sources on which our knowledge is based as *opera ascetica*. What happens, for example, if we return to the term that allegedly forms the root of this universal concept of ›asceticism‹?

23 Freud, *Das Ich und die Abwehrmechanismen; The Ego and the Mechanisms of Defense*, trans. by Baines, 153-158.

24 Harpham, *Ascetic Imperative*.

25 Wimbush and Valantasis (eds.), *Asceticism*.

26 Harpham, *Ascetic Imperative*, xiii.

27 Valantasis, *Constructions of power*, 797.

28 Wikipedia contains articles on a lemma related to asceticism, acétisme or Askese in 54 different languages. Accessed on 4 June 2019: www.wikidata.org/wiki/Q179807#sitelinks-wikipedia.

29 Ashbrook Harvey, *Asceticism and Society*.

30 Brakke, *Athanasius and the Politics*.

31 Miller and Martin (eds.), *Cultural Turn*.

32 Goehring, *Ascetics*.

33 Goodrich, *Contextualizing Cassian*.

34 Hunt, *Clothed in the Body*.

35 Leyser, *Authority and Asceticism*.

36 Rousseau, *Ascetics, Authority, and the Church*.

37 Graiver, *Asceticism of the Mind*.

II.

The etymological roots of ›asceticism‹ are to be found in the term ἄσκησις, which refers in classical Greek texts to ›exercise‹, ›practice‹ or ›training‹, primarily military exercise, but also physical exercise and, later, the exercise of virtues.³⁸ All three meanings may have motivated the introduction of ἄσκησις into Christian discourse, along with its derivation ἀσκητής (*askētēs*, practitioner or athlete). The term ἄσκησις has a physical aspect – training one’s body in and by austerity and overcoming bodily needs. It might also have retained its military implications by being tied to the understanding of monks and nuns fighting as soldiers of Christ.³⁹ Its understanding as moral training, however, was probably the main motivation for integrating it into Christian and, later on, monastic language. We have to keep in mind, however, that making ἄσκησις part of a monastic idiom was a deliberate choice, not just a natural adaptation of an existing semantic repertoire and not a matter of course. The same applies to the decision *not* to Latinize ἄσκησις in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages, but also the invention of the expression *asceticus* in early modern scholarship. It is also important to keep in mind that ἄσκησις was certainly not the only Greek term representing what we today consider ›ascetic‹. Claudia Rapp, for example, is currently working on a genealogy of the expressions πολιτεία (*politeia*) and πολίτευμα (*politeuma*) which became descriptive of solitary ›ascetic‹ life.⁴⁰

One of the most important witnesses of Christianizing ἄσκησις is the *Vita* of the desert monk Antony ascribed to Athanasius of Alexandria, a text that had a deep impact on monastic literature in the Greek world and, through its Latin translation by Evagrius of Antioch, in the Western world as well.⁴¹ It became one of the main documents describing, shaping and propagating the life of the desert fathers. Previous Christian authors, particularly Clement of Alexandria, use ἄσκησις as well, but do not apply it to monastic life. Clement still uses the term in reference to physical and military exercise, albeit metaphorically in reference to Christian virtue and restraint.⁴² After Athanasius, the classical meaning of ἄσκησις and ἀσκητής seems to have largely disappeared in Christian discourse. The expressions ἄσκησις and ἀσκητής referred at this point primarily to monks and hermits living a Christian life according to higher, self-imposed standards. In this process, new derivations of ἄσκησις appeared, such as the adjective ἀσκητικός (*askētikos*) and the nouns ἀσκητήριον (*askētērion*, ascetic dwelling, monastery) and ἀσκήτρια (*askētria*, female ἀσκητής).

38 On the term ἄσκησις, see the lemma ›Ascèse/Ascétisme‹, *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité*, vol. 1: 939-940.

39 Pinsent, Ascetic moods. For references to moral ἄσκησις and ἀσκητής in Greek philosophical texts, see Koch, *Quellen zur Geschichte der Askese*.

40 Rapp, Monastic jargon.

41 Athanasius of Alexandria, *Vita Antonii* (Greek text), ed. Bartelink, henceforth quoted as SC 400. On the question of authorship: Rubenson, Apologetics of asceticism. I assume that Athanasius was indeed the author of the *Vita Antonii*, though my argument would not become invalid if the text, or parts of it, were written by someone else. The two Latin versions have been recently edited by Gandt and Bertrand. On the reception of the *Vita Antonii*, see Bremmer, Athanasius’ *Life of Antony*.

42 Clement of Alexandria, *Paedagogus* I.7.57.1/3, SC 70, 212; II.4.42.3, SC108, 32; II.9.80.2, SC 108, 160; II.10.94.3, SC 108, 182; II.10.97.3, SC 108, 186; II.11.117.2, SC 108, 222; III.6.35.3, SC 158, 78; III.8.43.4, SC 158, 94.

I will first trace the use and the meaning of ἄσκησις in the *Vita Antonii*. Subsequently I will look at ἄσκησις and its derivatives in two collections of lives of monks and ›ascetics‹, Palladius' *Historia Lausiaca* and Theodoret of Cyrrhus' *Historia monachorum* (both written in the first half of the fifth century). Finally I will briefly compare a Greek and a Latin version of the *Vita* of the desert father Pachomius, the alleged father of coenobitical monasticism.

Palladius' *Historia Lausiaca* and the *Vita Pachomii* were, like the *Vita Antonii*, translated into Latin and had a deep impact on the imagination of the world of the desert fathers in the Western Christian tradition.⁴³ There is no Latin translation of Theodoret's *Historia religiosa*, possibly because of Theodoret's allegedly Nestorian sympathies, but maybe also because Western readers had a difficult time relating to the ›ascetic‹ practices praised in this work.

Athanasius uses the term ἄσκησις forty times; the term ἀσκητής four times, and the term ἀσκητηρίον twice. He refers to ἀσκητής three times in the first three sentences of the prologue of the *Vita Antonii* which reveals what the author wants to achieve by introducing this term:

We have entered into a noble contest with the monks of Egypt by choosing, through ἄσκησις in moral excellence either to become their equals or to surpass them. You too, surely have monastic communities (μοναστήρια), and the word ›monk‹ (μοναχός) is not just a word for you but a way of life. Justly then would one praise you for your intentions and justly would God grant your prayers. Since you have asked me about the life of the blessed Antony, clearly wishing to learn how he started his ἄσκησις and who he was before that and how he concluded his life and whether what is said about him is true, in order to emulate his zeal I have taken up your questions with great enthusiasm. I must tell you that the mere mention of Antony is an extraordinary benefit to me. I do know that, after you hear what I have to say and come to admire the man, you will also want to emulate his intention. To be sure, for monks the life of Antony is a fine model for ἄσκησις. Do not disbelieve what you have heard about him from those who have sung his praises but realize that what you have heard about him from them represents only a small part of what there is to tell. They have hardly told you anything at all.⁴⁴

43 Palladius, *Historia Lausiaca*, ed. Butler; Theodoret, *Historia religiosa*, ed. Canivet and Leroy-Molinghen, henceforth quoted as SC 234/SC 257.

44 Athanasius, *Vita Antonii*, prol. 1-3, SC 400, 124-126: Ἀγαθὴν ἄμιλλαν ἐνεστήσασθε πρὸς τοὺς ἐν Αἰγύπτῳ μοναχοὺς, ἧτοι παρισωθῆναι, ἢ καὶ ὑπερβάλλεσθαι τούτους προελόμενοι τῇ κατ' ἀρετὴν ὑμῶν ἀσκήσει. Καὶ γὰρ καὶ παρ' ὑμῖν λοιπὸν μοναστήρια, καὶ τὸ τῶν μοναχῶν ὄνομα πολιτεύεται. Ταύτην μὲν οὖν τὴν πρόθεσιν δικαίως ἂν τις ἐπαινέσειε, καὶ εὐχομέων ὑμῶν, ὁ Θεὸς τελειώσειεν· ἐπειδὴ δὲ ἀπητήσατε καὶ παρ' ἐμοῦ περὶ τῆς πολιτείας τοῦ μακαρίου Ἀντωνίου, μαθεῖν θέλοντες ὅπως τε ἤρξατο τῆς ἀσκήσεως, καὶ τίς ἦν πρὸ ταύτης, καὶ ὅποιον ἔσχε τοῦ βίου τὸ τέλος, καὶ εἰ ἀληθῆ τὰ περὶ αὐτοῦ λεγόμενά ἐστιν, ἵνα καὶ πρὸς τὸν ἐκείνου ζῆλον ἑαυτοὺς ἀγάγητε· μετὰ πολλῆς προθυμίας ἐδεξάμην τὸ παρ' ὑμῶν ἐπίταγμα. Κάμοι γὰρ μέγα κέρδος ὠφελείας ἐστὶ καὶ τὸ μόνον Ἀντωνίου μνημονεύειν. Οἶδα δὲ, ὅτι καὶ ὑμεῖς ἀκούσαντες, μετὰ τοῦ θαυμάσαι τὸν ἄνθρωπον, θελήσετε καὶ ζηλωσαὶ τὴν ἐκείνου πρόθεσιν· ἐστὶ γὰρ μοναχοῖς ἱκανὸς χαρακτήρ πρὸς ἀσκήσιν ὁ Ἀντωνίου βίος. Οἷς μὲν οὖν ἠκούσατε περὶ αὐτοῦ παρὰ τῶν ἀπαγγειλάντων, μὴ ἀπιστήσητε, ὀλίγα δὲ μᾶλλον ἀκηκοένοι παρ' αὐτῶν νομίζετε· πάντως γὰρ κάκεινοι μόνις τοσαῦτα διεγῆσαντο. Transl. Vivian and Athanassakis, 51-53 (slightly adjusted).

The *Vita Antonii* has, thus, a double purpose: to put a discursive monopoly on the recently deceased desert monk Antony and to use Antony's deeds and teachings (as they are narrated – and created – by Athanasius) as a means of explaining what ἄσκησις should entail. In doing so, Athanasius draws three boundaries of ἄσκησις. First, there is no pagan ἄσκησις of virtue. Even if pagan philosophers were to perform similar deeds of renunciation as Antony, it would not be ἄσκησις.⁴⁵ The only true philosophers are Antony and other practitioners of Christian ἄσκησις. Secondly, the same applies to heretics (Meletians and Arians) who could possibly live a life similar to that of Antony but nevertheless would never deserve to be called ἀσκητῆς and should by absolutely no means be considered misguided fellow ὀσκητιῶν.⁴⁶ Thirdly – and that is most important for us – Athanasius defines a relatively narrow repertoire of acts that would count as ἄσκησις, which do not include those spectacular, super-human practices of bodily *mortificatio* that might draw the admiration of ordinary believers and make them seen as something like Christian fakirs and hunger artists. Antony is not even a saint. Athanasius never calls him ἅγιος (*hagios*, holy) and only twice μακάριος (*makarios*, blessed). 'Saint Antony' is a later textual construction based on 'spin offs' of the *Vita Antonii*.⁴⁷ Athanasius makes the point that ἄσκησις may be acted out in a bodily and social way but that its purpose is neither the punishment nor the mortification of the body, nor the complete withdrawal from the Christian world as a means to its own end. His ἄσκησις is targeted towards reaching a state of mind. This becomes clear when we go through the references to ἄσκησις and his description of Antony as ἀσκητῆς throughout the text.

The *Vita Antonii* can be roughly divided into three parts. Antony's transformation into a desert monk and hermit which includes a dramatic description of his battles with demons and his twenty year-long self-incarceration,⁴⁸ his teachings on demons and monastic life,⁴⁹ and, finally, his life as a desert monk moving back and forth between solitude in the 'inner mountain' and acting as a public persona who engages in debates with pagans, fights heretics, performs miracles and teaches his community of followers.⁵⁰ The notion of Antony as the 'first hermit' and of Antony's fierce battles against demons, imprinted in our mind, for example, through the Isenheim Altarpiece, is, thus, a product of a selective reading of the work. Such a reading ignores the fact that almost half of the text consists of his teachings and that he lived large parts of his life in a community and played a public role as wonder worker, mediator, healer and exorcist.⁵¹ Gregory of Nazianzus' characterization of the *Vita Antonii* as a monastic rule, νομοθεσία (*nomothesia*), might be much more appropriate than understanding the text as the heroic biography of the 'first hermit'.⁵²

45 On pagan philosophers: Athanasius, *Vita Antonii*, c. 72-80, SC 400, 320-340.

46 Athanasius, *Vita Antonii*, c. 68-69, SC 400, 314-316; c. 82, SC 400, 344-350; c. 89, SC 400, 362-364. See also Brakke, *Athanasius and Asceticism*, 201-265.

47 See Diem, Antony.

48 Athanasius, *Vita Antonii*, c. 1-15, SC 400, 124-176.

49 Athanasius, *Vita Antonii*, c. 16-43, SC 400, 176-252; c. 55-56, SC 400, 280-288; c. 74-76, SC 400, 324-330.

50 Athanasius, *Vita Antonii*, c. 44-94 (interrupted by his teachings), SC 400, 252-376.

51 See Brown, Rise and function.

52 Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oratio* 21, c. 5, PG 35, col. 1085D-1088A.

Athanasius attached the following practices to ἄσκησις: leaving one's family and social environment behind and banning the memory of one's kin from one's mind,⁵³ submitting oneself to vigils, fasting, eating once a day, sleeping uncomfortably and not oiling one's body. The purpose of these practices is avoiding temptation.⁵⁴ At another place Athanasius adds wearing hair cloth and animal skin and not washing oneself to the list of practices of ἄσκησις.⁵⁵ He and other monks turn the desert into a city of ἄσκησις.⁵⁶ Antony gathers followers who want to imitate his ἄσκησις,⁵⁷ which is to be understood as daily practice and as perseverance.⁵⁸ The purpose of ἄσκησις is gaining the spirit of discernment,⁵⁹ and it is a tool for fighting demons.⁶⁰ One performs ἄσκησις in order to please God, not in order to be a prophet⁶¹ or to cast out demons.⁶² Demons might applaud a misguided ἄσκησις.⁶³ Antony's ἄσκησις is a contemplative practice.⁶⁴ The ἄσκησις that he learnt from Scripture allows Antony to be a teacher instead of a martyr. Antony practices his ἄσκησις in solitude;⁶⁵ he prays for a woman who fell sick through excessive ἄσκησις.⁶⁶

Athanasius makes clear that ἄσκησις should not afflict the body. He emphasizes that neither the twenty years of self-incarceration nor Antony's practice of ἄσκησις until his 105th year of life really affected his body. Antony leaves the cave as young as he had entered it and even shortly before death he retained perfect eyesight and bodily strength.⁶⁷

If we think of other texts praising the life of Egyptian and Syrian desert fathers, the ἄσκησις propagated by Athanasius in the *Vita Antonii* is remarkably tame and may even be considered boring. There is no self-destructive mortification or self-inflicted punishment. It is possible that Athanasius responded to all the wild tales going around about Antony by describing him as someone who practices a moderate form of austerity and solitude that is socially compatible and can indeed be emulated by those following his teachings.⁶⁸

53 Athanasius, *Vita Antonii*, c. 3.1, SC 400, 136; c. 3.5, SC 400, 136-138; c. 5.2, SC 400, 142.

54 Athanasius, *Vita Antonii*, c. 7.3/8/11, SC 400, 150-154

55 Athanasius, *Vita Antonii*, c. 47.1-2, SC 400, 262; c. 93.1, SC 400, 372-374.

56 Athanasius, *Vita Antonii*, c. 8.2, SC 400, 156.

57 Athanasius, *Vita Antonii*, c. 14.2, SC 400, 172; c. 15.3, SC 400, 176.

58 Athanasius, *Vita Antonii*, c. 18.2, SC 400, 184; c. 91.2, SC 400, 368.

59 Athanasius, *Vita Antonii*, c. 22.3, SC 400, 196; c. 66.8, SC 400, 310.

60 Athanasius, *Vita Antonii*, c. 25.4, SC 400, 206; c. 27.4, SC 400, 210; c. 30.1, SC 400, 218; c. 40.6, SC 400, 244.

61 Athanasius, *Vita Antonii*, c. 34.1, SC 400, 228.

62 Athanasius, *Vita Antonii*, c. 38.2, SC 400, 238.

63 Athanasius, *Vita Antonii*, c. 35.1, SC 400, 230.

64 Athanasius, *Vita Antonii*, c. 45.1, SC 400, 256; c. 84.2, SC 400, 352.

65 Athanasius, *Vita Antonii*, c. 51.1, SC 400, 272; c. 82.2, SC 400, 344.

66 Athanasius, *Vita Antonii*, c. 61.2, SC 400, 294.

67 Athanasius, *Vita Antonii*, c. 14, SC 400, 172-174; c. 93, SC 400, 372-376.

68 This reading slightly deviates from Jan Bremmer's interpretation of the *Vita Antonii* as a text having the purpose of spatially and socially marginalizing Antony. The purpose, keeping Antony under control, remains the same in Bremmer's and my reading. See Bremmer, Athanasius' *Life of Antony*.

Athanasius does not apply the term ἄσκησις to the heroic deeds in Antony's early life, which may have shaped the imagination of the desert father and been received most in literary and artistic renditions of the saint. His self-incarceration in the tombs and barracks is clearly marked as a transitory state that Antony gives up in order to become a teacher of an ἄσκησις of moderation that enables his followers to fight demons and to gain spiritual understanding.

Soon after its composition, the *Vita Antonii* was translated into Latin twice and it is important to keep in mind that ›translation‹ is not only a linguistic endeavor – finding Latin equivalents of a fairly new monastic idiom – but also a translation from one cultural context to another. The first attempt to translate the *Vita Antonii* is preserved only in one manuscript.⁶⁹ As a literal rendition of its content it may not have sufficed to be a cultural translation, which may have been the reason why it was replaced by a new, freer rendition by Evagrius of Antioch, which is preserved in more than 400 manuscripts in the West.⁷⁰

These Latin translations of the *Vita Antonii* convey the same message of praising a life of moderate solitude, fasting, prayer, poverty and renunciation of luxury, but the specific context in which the original version was written, the competition with philosophers, the battles with Arians and Meletians and the aim of domesticating a potentially subversive ›ascetic‹ movement, may not have mattered as much to a Latin readership. For the readers of the Latin *Vita Antonii*, the desert inhabited by Antony and his followers was a far-away and exotic country.

The first translator of the *Vita Antonii* fairly consistently rendered ἄσκησις with *studium*, sometimes *studium religionis* or *studium uirtutis*, a much weaker term not carrying the connotations of philosophical virtuousness or physical exercise. Evagrius' approach to ἄσκησις is quite different. He either paraphrased passages that were referring to ἄσκησις so that he did not have to translate the term itself or translated ἄσκησις each time with a different Latin expression. Evagrius' deconstruction – or maybe rather destruction – of Athanasius' key term may be a sign of disagreement with Athanasius' attempt to depict Antony as the Christian counter model to those who practiced a philosophical training of virtues.

If this was the case, it turned out to be a constructive deconstruction that created a semantic debris field open for those who wanted to shape a new Latin idiom of monastic life. We find *instantia uirtutis*; *sanctum propositum*; *asperum et arduum institutum*; *sollicitudo*; *studium*; *arreptum institutum*; *subiugere corpus suum*; *labor*; *propositum*; *uigor*; *rigor instituti*; *consuetudo nostra*; *merces instituti boni*; *conuersatio*; *studium beatae uitae*; *merita*; *studium religiosum* and *principia meritorum*.⁷¹ Many of these expressions became key terms in Latin monastic language; most of them re-surface, for example, in the *Regula Benedicti*.

69 *Vita Antonii, uersio uetustissima*, ed. Bertrand and Gandt, textus, 105-177.

70 *Vita Antonii, uersio Euagrii*, ed. Bertrand and Gandt, textus, 1-103.

71 *Vita Antonii, uersio Euagrii*, prologue 1, ed. Bertrand and Gandt, textus, 3: *sanctum propositum and instantia uirtutis*; c. 3.1, *ibid.*, 7: *asperum et arduum institutum*; c. 3.5, *ibid.*, 7: *sollicitudo*; c. 4.1, *ibid.*, 8: *studium*; c. 5.2, *ibid.*, 9: *arreptum institutum*; c. 7.3, *ibid.*, 12: *subiugere corpus suum*; c. 7.8, *ibid.*, 12: *labor*; c. 14.2, *ibid.*, 20: *propositum*; c. 16.3, *ibid.*, 22: *uigor*; c. 19.1, *ibid.*, 25: *rigor instituti*; c. 27.4, *ibid.*, 34: *consuetudo nostra*; c. 34.1, *ibid.*, 40: *merces instituti boni*; c. 35.1, *ibid.*, 40: *studium*; c. 38.2, *ibid.*, 43: *conuersatio*; c. 40.6, *ibid.*: *propositum*; c. 45.1, *ibid.*, 50: *studium beatae uitae*; c. 82.2, *ibid.*, 89: *rigor*; c. 84.2, *ibid.*, 92: *merita*; c. 88.1, *ibid.*, 96: *merita*; c. 91.2, *ibid.*, 101: *studium religiosum*; c. 93.1, *ibid.*, 101: *principia meritorum*.

In sum, Athanasius' introduction and use of the term ἄσκησις might challenge some of our understanding of ›asceticism‹. His ἄσκησις shows little concern with the body; it is not directed *against* the body and it is by no means excessive or disruptive. Athanasius succeeded in introducing the concept of ἄσκησις into Greek monastic discourse, but his Latin translators showed little interest in appropriating the term and using it for shaping a unified Latin language of monastic life.

The Greek *Historia Lausiaca* complicates our understanding of ἄσκησις even more.⁷² Palladius uses ἄσκησις 24 times and ἀσκητής 16 times. He adds the non-classical expression ἀσκήτρια, which appears four times. The term ἀσκητηρίον (or ἀσκήτριον) appears six and ἀσκητικός seven times. We can assume that ἄσκησις and its derivatives were fully established in monastic language at that point and Palladius shows no inclination to explain what ἄσκησις actually means. There is no indication that Palladius' use of ἄσκησις was motivated by responding to philosophical traditions of ›ascetic‹ life. There is, however, a remarkable tension: Palladius describes in his *Historia Lausiaca* a wide array of Christian religious practices ranging from mutilating oneself in order to avoid priesthood or sexual temptations, enduring dropsy while healing others, sitting in the desert completely naked in order to be eaten by insects, fasting for forty days and extreme sleep deprivation to living a chaste marriage, acts of charity, taking care of a cripple, acting as a midwife, providing monasteries with medicine, supporting the poor, and disinheriting one's children to support the church. Palladius makes the point that there are innumerable more or less radical options for monks, nuns, and lay people to live a God-pleasing life and that one is not preferable to another. It is striking, however, that he uses the term ἄσκησις only in the context of the same moderate ›ascetic‹ practices that are praised in the *Vita Antonii* and that he calls only those individuals ἀσκητής and ἀσκήτρια who live an ordinary monastic life. What we might call ›radical asceticism‹ is, in Palladius' work, not called ἄσκησις.

There is, as in the Latin *Vita Antonii*, no consistent translation of ἄσκησις. We find *uir-tutes abstinentiae*;⁷³ *uita*;⁷⁴ *meritum*;⁷⁵ *obseruatio*;⁷⁶ *uirtus*;⁷⁷ *propositum uitae monachorum*;⁷⁸ *studium*;⁷⁹ *propositum*;⁸⁰ *consuetudo*.⁸¹ The term ἀσκητής is either used as an epithet of a specific name (Or the ἀσκητής, Pior the ἀσκητής, Marcus the ἀσκητής etc.)⁸² or simply refers to monks in general. It is almost exclusively translated with *monachus*. The female version also refers to members of a monastic community and is translated with *uirgo Dei*, *ancilla Dei*, or

72 Edition of the Greek text by Butler, *Lausiaca History of Palladius*.

73 Palladius, *Historia Lausiaca*, Gr. XII.1, ed. Butler, 35/Lat. 12.1, ed. Wellhausen 519.

74 Palladius, *Historia Lausiaca*, Gr. XVI.3, ed. Butler, 38/Lat. 14.3, ed. Wellhausen, 523; Gr. XXVIII.1, ed. Butler, 84/Lat. 28.3, ed. Wellhausen, 586.

75 Palladius, *Historia Lausiaca*, Gr. XVII.5, ed. Butler, 44/Lat. 17.8, ed. Wellhausen, 532.

76 Palladius, *Historia Lausiaca*, Gr. XVIII.2, ed. Butler, 48/Lat. 18.3, ed. Wellhausen, 537.

77 Palladius, *Historia Lausiaca*, Gr. XVIII.3, ed. Butler, 48/Lat. 18.4, ed. Wellhausen, 537; Gr. XLVII.2, ed. Butler, 136/Lat. XLVII.2, ed. Wellhausen, 647.

78 Palladius, *Historia Lausiaca*, Gr. XIX.10, ed. Butler, 61/Lat. 19.15, ed. Wellhausen, 556.

79 Palladius, *Historia Lausiaca*, Gr. XLVII.9, ed. Butler, 138/Lat. 48.2, ed. Wellhausen, 656.

80 Palladius, *Historia Lausiaca*, Gr. LXI.6, ed. Butler, 157/Lat. 61.8, ed. Wellhausen, 677.

81 Palladius, *Historia Lausiaca*, Gr. LXVIII.1, ed. Butler, 163/Lat. 68.1, ed. Wellhausen, 685.

82 Palladius, *Historia Lausiaca*, Gr. IX, ed. Butler, 29; X, *ibid.*, 32; XVIII.25, *ibid.*, 56.

soror.⁸³ The term ἀσκητήριον is mostly translated as *monasterium*,⁸⁴ though the translator also uses *asceterium* – to my knowledge the one and only instance of Latinizing a derivative of ἄσκησις.⁸⁵ The Latin version of the *Codex Iustinianus* uses *asceterium* as well, which shows that Latinizing ἄσκησις and ἀσκητικός would have been in the realm of possibilities.⁸⁶

Another example of an early and influential narrative rendition of monastic life is Theodoret of Cyrrihus' *Historia religiosa*, which describes the life of radical desert monks in Syria who performed various forms of extreme bodily ›asceticism‹, ranging from living a life of a stylite; having oneself being eaten up by maggots and bitten by snakes and insects;⁸⁷ living without shelter,⁸⁸ immured or enclosed in caves, holes and pits;⁸⁹ enduring snow, rain, and burning heat;⁹⁰ fasting and enduring thirst for days or weeks;⁹¹ eating only uncooked food;⁹² wearing heavy iron chains;⁹³ standing for days or remaining in uncomfortable positions;⁹⁴ sleeping on the ground;⁹⁵ keeping complete silence;⁹⁶ wearing masks of skin with just an opening to breathe;⁹⁷ keeping one's bowels under control in spite of diarrhea,⁹⁸ etc. Unlike the *Historia Lausiaca*, the *Historia religiosa* describes hardly any forms of moderate ›asceticism‹ and unlike the *Vita Antonii*, the ἄσκησις praised in the *Historia religiosa* is explicitly meant to wear out and harm the body⁹⁹ and to overcome its nature.¹⁰⁰ The practices praised

83 Palladius, *Historia Lausiaca*, Gr. XXXVII.12, ed. Butler, 113/Lat. 37.16, ed. Wellhausen, 617: *uirgo Dei*; Gr. LXIX.1, ed. Butler, 164/Lat. 69.1, ed. Wellhausen, 687: *ancilla Dei*; Gr. LXX.4, ed. Butler, 166/Lat. 70.9, ed. Wellhausen, 690: *soror*.

84 Palladius, *Historia Lausiaca*, c. XXIX.1, ed. Butler, 84; XXXVII.12, *ibid.*, 113; LXIX.1, *ibid.*, 164.

85 Palladius, *Historia Lausiaca*, c. XVIII.12, ed. Butler, 52/Lat. 18.16, ed. Wellhausen, 542.

86 *Codex Iustinianus, Corpus iuris civilis*, vol. 2, ed. Krueger, for example I.53(54).3-4, *ibid.*, 37.

87 Theodoret, *Historia religiosa* XXII.5, SC 257, 130; XXVI.10, SC 257, 178.

88 Theodoret, *Historia religiosa* XVIII.1, SC 257, 34; XXI.3, SC 257, 72.

89 Theodoret, *Historia religiosa* II.2, SC 234, 196; III.2, SC 234, 248; IV.3, SC 234, 294; VII.1, SC 234, 366; VIII.1, SC 234, 372-374; IX.3, SC 234, 410-412; XIII.2, SC 234, 476; XV.1, SC 257, 18; XVII.1, SC 257, 34; XVIII.2, SC 257, 54; XIX.1, SC 257, 58; XX.1, SC 257, 64; XXII.5, SC 257, 130; XXV.2, SC 257, 154-156; XXVI.4, SC 257, 164-166; XXVI.6-7, SC 257, 170-174; XXVII.1, SC 257, 216-218; XXIX.2-3, SC 257, 232-234.

90 Theodoret, *Historia religiosa* XXI.6, SC 257, 78; XXI.13, SC 257, 90; XXIV.9, SC 257, 152; XXVII.1, SC 257, 216-218.

91 Theodoret, *Historia religiosa* II.2, SC 234, 194; III.3, SC 234, 250; XII.3, SC 234, 462-464; XVIII.4, SC 257, 56; XXI.23-24, SC 257, 106-108; XXVI.9, SC 257, 176-178.

92 Theodoret, *Historia religiosa* XI.1, SC 234, 454; XIII.3, SC 234, 478-480; XV.1, SC 257, 18; XVII.6, SC 257, 42-44; XVIII.1, SC 257, 52-54; XXI.11, SC 257, 84-88.

93 Theodoret, *Historia religiosa* IV.6, SC 234, 302; XV.2, SC 257, 18-20; XXI.8, SC 257, 80; XXIII.1, SC 257, 134; XXVI.10, SC 257, 178-180; XXIX.4, SC 257, 234-236.

94 Theodoret, *Historia religiosa* III.2, SC 234, 248; III.5, SC 234, 254; IV.7, SC 234, 256-258; XVII.1, SC 257, 34; XXIV.1, SC 257, 138; XXIV.4, SC 257, 142-144; XXIV.6, SC 257, 146; XXVI.2, SC 257, 160-162; XXVI.22-23, SC 257, 204-208; XXVII.1, SC 257, 216-218; XXVIII.3, SC 257, 226-228; XXIX.4, SC 257, 234-236.

95 Theodoret, *Historia religiosa* XII.1, SC 234, 260; XVII.6, SC 257, 42-44.

96 Theodoret, *Historia religiosa* IV.3, SC 234, 294; XIX.1, SC 257, 58; XXII.2, SC 257, 126.

97 Theodoret, *Historia religiosa* XXVII.2, SC 257, 218-220.

98 Theodoret, *Historia religiosa* XXI.5, SC 257, 76-78; XXII.4, SC 257, 128-130.

99 See, e.g. Theodoret, *Historia religiosa*, Prologue.5, SC 234, 132; VIII.9, SC 234, 392-394; XVII.7, SC 257, 44; XVIII.1, SC 257, 52-54; XVIII.4, SC 257, 56; XIX.3, SC 257, 60-62; XXI.3, SC 257, 72-74; XXIV.1, SC 257, 138; XXVI.2, SC 257, 160-162; XXVI.5, SC 257, 166-168; XXVII.2, SC 257, 218-220; XXVIII.3, SC 257, 226-228; XXX.2, SC 257, 242.

100 Theodoret, *Historia religiosa* XXI.3, SC 257, 72-74.

in the *Historia religiosa* create fame and admiration in a manner analogous to the fame of actors and athletes,¹⁰¹ and allow the monks to perform miracles, but there is no indication that ἄσκησις should gain *discretio*, contain temptations or battle down demons. It is ›asceticism‹ for the sake of the body, not for the sake of moral improvement: a sport and philosophy and a way of pursuing the love of God.

The monks and nuns described in the *Historia religiosa* are superstars, who were to be admired from a safe distance. Theodoret limits their subversive potential not by downplaying their achievements but by acting as their impresario, to use a term coined by Peter Brown.¹⁰² Theodoret applies the term ἄσκησις rarely,¹⁰³ but at numerous places the adjective ἀσκητικός, most often in reference to space: the ›ascetic dwelling‹; ›ascetic cave‹; ›cell‹; ›ascetic wrestling school‹;¹⁰⁴ sometimes in reference to an ›ascetic life‹;¹⁰⁵ ›ascetic community‹;¹⁰⁶ ›ascetic cloak‹;¹⁰⁷ ›ascetic virtues‹.¹⁰⁸ His objective is to show his readers *where* to find them by defining specific spaces as ›ascetic‹. It is the framework that is ›ascetic‹ rather than the protagonists themselves: another way of keeping the impact of ἄσκησις under control.

Even though Theodore's saints may have been the polar opposite of Athanasius' Antony,¹⁰⁹ both authors share one objective. They framed their ideal of radical religious life in opposition to non-Christian, especially philosophical, feats of endurance. Instead of Christianizing the classical ἄσκησις Theodoret speaks about a Christian φιλοσοφία (*philosophia*), describes the desert as γυμνάσιον (*gymnasion*) and παλαίστρα (*palaistra*) with God as διατριβή (*diatribē*, umpire). Moreover, he deploys the language of Platonic pederasty to describe the relationship between a desert monk as ἐραστής (*erastēs*) and God as ἐρώμενος (*eromenos*).¹¹⁰ Theodoret's ›asceticism‹ could thus be most aptly described as an often bizarre and slightly kinky form of love-making with God – hence the title φιλόθεος ἱστορία (*philotheos historia*, God-loving history).

101 Theodoret, *Historia religiosa*, prologue.1-3, SC 234, 124-130.

102 Brown, *Cult of the Saints*, 38. Brown refers to bishops organizing and monopolizing the cult of martyrs, but the term is certainly as applicable to bishops organizing and controlling the veneration of living or recently deceased saints. On Theodoret's role as ›impresario‹, see, for example, *Historia religiosa* IX.11, SC 234, 426; IX.15, SC 234, 434; XX.4, SC 257, 66-68; XXI.5-11, SC 257, 76-88; XXIX.1, SC 257, 232.

103 Theodoret, *Historia religiosa* III.11, SC 234, 266: glorious for his ἄσκησις; XII.5.3, SC 234, 466: completing forty years of ἄσκησις; XXI.11.31, SC 257, 86: »if people think more of my ἄσκησις but God thinks less...«

104 Theodoret, *Historia religiosa* II.1, SC 234, 194; II.9, SC 234, 216; II.21, SC 234, 240; III.4, SC 234, 252; III.12, SC 234, 268; IV.13, SC 234, 324; XIII.11, SC 234, 494; XXII.1, SC 257, 124; XXVI.4, SC 257, 164.

105 Theodoret, *Historia religiosa* II.9, SC 234, 216; IV.12, SC 234, 320; VI.8, SC 234, 356; XII.5, SC 234, 468; XIII.1, SC 234, 474; XXV.1, SC 257, 18.

106 Theodoret, *Historia religiosa* V.7, SC 234, 338; XIII.3, SC 234, 478.

107 Theodoret, *Historia religiosa* V.8, SC 234, 340.

108 Theodoret, *Historia religiosa* XVII.2, SC 257, 34.

109 On the differences between Syrian and Egyptian monastic life, see Brown, *Treasure in Heaven*, 51-118; idem, *Rise and function*.

110 On the use of ἐραστής and ἐρώμενος, see, for example, Theodoret, *Historia religiosa* Prol. 5, SC 234, 132; II.2, SC 234, 198; II.6, SC 234, 210; II.10, SC 234, 216; II.17, SC 234, 232; III.4, SC 234, 252; IV.3, SC 234, 294; IV.4, SC 234, 296; IV.5, SC 234, 298; VI.8, SC 234, 356; XI.3, SC 234, 458; XVII.10, SC 257, 46; XXIV.8, SC 257, 150; XXIX.6, SC 257, 236; XXXI.4, SC 257, 264; XXXI.8, SC 257, 276; XXXI.15, SC 257, 296; XXXI.17-18, SC 257, 300/304; XXXI.21, SC 257, 312.

A last, slightly later, example is the *Vita* of Pachomius, which exists in various Coptic and Greek versions and also in a Latin translation of Dionysius Exiguus (d. 544).¹¹¹ Dionysius' translation is based on a text very close to the Greek so-called *Vita tertia* which allows another comparison to be made leading to a strikingly similar observation. The author of this Greek *Vita Pachomii* uses ἀσκητής rarely (seven times) and ἀσκητηρίον once, often enough to argue that it was part of his monastic language but rarely enough not to consider it a key expression. Dionysius Exiguus translates ἀσκητηρίον with *monasterium*,¹¹² as one expects, but finds, again, a different translation of ἀσκητής whenever the term appears: *continentia*,¹¹³ *perfecta conuerstatio*,¹¹⁴ *regula districtior*,¹¹⁵ *sollicitudo*,¹¹⁶ *institutata monachorum*.¹¹⁷

This snapshot shows that the Greek term ἄσκησις provides little help in getting a handle on late antique ›asceticism‹. Athanasius, Palladius, Theodoret and the author of the Greek *Vita Pachomii* made different, maybe consciously opposing, claims on the meaning and the practice of ἄσκησις. Some Greek works we count as belonging to the canon of ›ascetic works‹ avoid the term ἄσκησις almost entirely. This applies to the writings of Evagrius Ponticus, who was a major source of inspiration for John Cassian (the major Western theorist of ›ascetic life), and to Basil whose Ἀσκητικόν does not deploy the term ἄσκησις in the body of the text. All of this shows that any attempt to become more precise by replacing ›asceticism‹ with ›askēsis‹ – as it is done quite often – is not at all helpful. Distilling a true, all-encompassing and overall applicable meaning of ἄσκησις out of these works is a futile task.

III.

Evagrius of Antioch's trouble or unwillingness to find a Latin equivalent for ἄσκησις might be a good starting point for complicating the ›ascetic‹ nature of Western monasticism as well. Of all variants of ›ascetic‹ life described in the *Vita Antonii*, the *Historia Lausiaca*, and the *Historia religiosa*, the moderate set of practices proposed by Athanasius took the strongest roots in the Latin West. Western monks and nuns did not emulate the body-tormenting athletes and God-lovers of Theodoret's desert, nor did they embrace the whole spectrum of religious practices we find in the *Historia Lausiaca*. They probably regarded many of these practices as admirable from a distance in time and space, practiced in exotic countries but not to be tried at home, where equally worthy but more sustainable options became available.¹¹⁸ Gregory of Tours tells the melancholic tale of Vulfilaic, a Gallic stylite who endured snow and rain on his

111 For an overview of the hagiographic tradition on Pachomius and an attempt to determine a chronology and inter-dependences, see Veilleux, *Pachomian Koinonia 1*, 1-21 and Rousseau, *Pachomius*, 37-48.

112 *Vita Pachomii tertia*, c. 31/*Vita Pachomii Latina*, c. 31, ed. Cranenburgh, 158-159.

113 *Vita Pachomii tertia*, c. 13/*Vita Pachomii Latina*, c. 13, ed. Cranenburgh, 108-109.

114 *Vita Pachomii tertia*, c. 19/*Vita Pachomii Latina*, c. 18, ed. Cranenburgh, 124-125.

115 *Vita Pachomii tertia*, c. 21/*Vita Pachomii Latina*, c. 22, ed. Cranenburgh, 130-131.

116 *Vita Pachomii tertia*, c. 21/*Vita Pachomii Latina*, c. 22, ed. Cranenburgh, 130-131.

117 *Vita Pachomii tertia*, c. 23/*Vita Pachomii Latina*, c. 24, ed. Cranenburgh, 138-139.

118 See, for example, Sulpicius Severus, *Dialogi* I, c. 24-25, ed. Fontaine and Dupré, 198-204, contrasting the achievements of the desert fathers with those of home-grown religious life.

column and relentlessly converted worshipers of Diana to Christianity. Vulfilaic had clearly missed the point in his attempt to become a desert monk in Northern Gaul. His bishop lured him from his column, which was then immediately destroyed. The only option left to Vulfilaic was becoming just an ordinary monk.¹¹⁹

John Cassian argues against radical and spectacular ›asceticism‹ in the first two books of his *Collationes* in which Abba Moses explained to him and his friend Germanus that desert monks do not deserve admiration and emulation for their endurance of hunger and physical pain, which more often than not appeared to be misguided and harmful. No forms of restraint, fasting, prayer, solitude, are ever a means to their own end but tools to achieve *puritas cordis* (purity of the heart) and to strive for control over one's *cogitationes* (thoughts).¹²⁰ Instead of bodily mortification, Cassian recommends submitting oneself to spiritual guidance and introspection that may help to cope with the loss of *discretio* that came along with original sin.¹²¹ Michel Foucault sees in Abba Moses' advice the beginning of Christian confession and a turning point in the history of subjectivity.¹²²

Athanasius recounts in the *Vita Antonii* how Antony recommended his monks to write down their sinful thoughts on wax tablets in order to expose themselves to shame by re-reading them *as if* someone else were reading them.¹²³ Evagrius' Latin rendition makes an important change. Monks should write down their thoughts not *as if* someone else were reading them but *in order that* they be read by others.¹²⁴ Can we add the imperative of the confession of one's innermost thoughts and feelings and the willingness to expose oneself to external scrutiny and shame to a specifically Western ›ascetic‹ repertoire? As I will show, the same question – is this still ›asceticism‹? – can be asked with regard to various other practices emerging in Western texts – and the problem is that each answer modifies the nature of the supposedly universal concept of ›asceticism‹.

Fasting, vigils, prayer, solitude, austerity and perseverance, the barebones ›asceticism‹ praised in the *Vita Antonii*, remain in the center of Latin ›ascetic‹ discourse, but it undergoes three crucial transformations. The first one has been indicated by Robert Markus as the ›ascetic invasion‹. Fifth- and sixth-century bishops who underwent a monastic training before returning to the world as ecclesiastical leaders transformed monastic ideals into the basis of pastoral care and instruction.¹²⁵ Caesarius of Arles' sermons, which urged ordinary Christians to restrain their sexuality, to avoid drunkenness and to partake in the liturgical hours, belong to the prime documents of an imperative of lay ›asceticism‹.¹²⁶ But there are two other important ›ascetic transformations‹. Monks and nuns placed their ›ascetic‹ achievements, which supposedly brought them closer to God, in the service of the non-›ascetic‹ world in

119 Gregory of Tours, *Decem Libri Historiarum* VIII.15, ed. Krusch and Levison, 382-383.

120 Cassian, *Collationes* I, ed. Pichery, 78-108.

121 Cassian, *Collationes* II, ed. Pichery, 111-134.

122 Foucault, *On the Government of the Living*, 261-313.

123 Athanasius, *Vita Antonii*, c. 55.6-13, SC 400, 282-286.

124 *Vita Antonii, uersio Euagrii*, c. 55, ed. Bertrand and Gandt, textus, 62-63. See also *ibid.*, textus, 276-278 for a synoptic presentation of all three versions.

125 Markus, *End of Ancient Christianity*, 199-211.

126 Bailey, Lisa Kaaren, »These Are Not Men«, 23-43.

order to act as intercessors. ›Ascetic‹ purity became, in this way, a tool for spiritual power and this spiritual power could be used to perform intercessory prayer on behalf of those who were unable to live an ›ascetic‹ life.¹²⁷ The ›holy poor‹ replaced the real poor as recipients of charity.¹²⁸ The ultimately unachievable state of chastity as still described in the works of John Cassian, was transformed into the notion of an organized and demonstrable sexual abstinence as a necessary condition for effective intercession.¹²⁹ Does it make sense to depict this ›organized chastity‹ as sexual ›asceticism‹ or is virginity and continence a worthy replacement of ›asceticism‹? Can ›asceticism‹ be used to achieve something like ›purity‹?

A third ›ascetic transformation‹, which is closely related to the integration of monastic life into broader social structures, consists of regulating and de-individualizing the barebones ›asceticism‹ of the *Vita Antonii*. This can be observed most prominently in the *Regula Benedicti*. Fasting turns into regulated eating, the observance of periods of Lent, vegetarianism, and the strict prohibition against eating outside the designated meal times.¹³⁰ Prayer and vigils turn into strict liturgical *ordines*, liturgical hours spread over day and night, and into provisions of liturgical discipline that ensure the high ›quality‹ of the prayer performed by monks and nuns.¹³¹ Poverty becomes the renunciation of private property within the safe structures of wealth held in common by the community. The rugged clothing of the desert monks give place to uniform habits and keeping a small wardrobe.¹³² Renunciation of the world transforms into a legalized and ritualized procedure of monastic conversion and the irreversibility of monastic vows.¹³³ This ›ascetic transformation‹ allowed monks to integrate Antony and other desert fathers into their collective past while not having to live a desert father life themselves. The *Regula Benedicti* presents itself as a ›Rule for Beginners‹ and recommends the reading and emulation of the *vitae patrum*. For those who have tested themselves in coenobitic life, it offers the additional option of moving into the desert like Antony.¹³⁴

Benedict – and to a certain extent other authors of monastic rules – not only ›regulates‹ ›asceticism‹ and transforms fasting, prayer, poverty, and austerity from an individual pursuit of self-perfection into a collective endeavor, but he also places three other practices at the heart of monastic existence: unconditional *oboedientia*, the attitude of *humilitas*, and the renunciation of one's *propria uoluntas* (individual will).¹³⁵ Should the unconditional subordination towards a superior, the institution or a rule, the renunciation of one's will, and the delegation of responsibility for one's salvation be considered the end of ›asceticism‹ or rather as an expansion of the ›ascetic‹ repertoire? Should we consider the rise of medieval monasticism the demise of ›asceticism‹?

127 An example for using ›ascetic‹ practices to gain the power of intercession (in this case not towards God but towards the emperor) can be found in Sulpicius Severus, *Dialogi* II, c. 5.5-10, ed. Fontaine and Dupré, 240-242.

128 See Brown, *Treasure in Heaven*.

129 Diem, *Das monastische Experiment*.

130 *Regula Benedicti*, c. 41, ed. de Vogüé and Neufville, 580-584; c. 49, *ibid.*, 604-606.

131 *Regula Benedicti*, c. 19-20, de Vogüé and Neufville, 534-538.

132 *Regula Benedicti*, c. 55, de Vogüé and Neufville, 618-622.

133 *Regula Benedicti*, c. 58-61, de Vogüé and Neufville, 626-640.

134 *Regula Benedicti*, c. 1.5, de Vogüé and Neufville, 438.

135 Esp. *Regula Benedicti*, c. 5, de Vogüé and Neufville, 464-468 and c. 7, *ibid.*, 472-490. On obedience see Bhalldraithe, *Obedience: The doctrine of the Irish monastic rules*.

Latin hagiography is profoundly influenced by the *Vita Antonii*.¹³⁶ Many saints' lives share Athanasius' technique of identifying radical, body-centered ›ascetic‹ practices as a matter of the past rather than the present and turning them into attributes of sanctity rather than guidelines to be practiced. Many Latin saints' lives depict forms of radical religious life as markers of a transitional phase that is followed by a re-integration into society and the adoption of a much more moderate regime that can be emulated without having the power of a saint, a process that, as many hagiographers emphasize, takes place without compromising one's standards and ideals. This adjustment creates, in a similar way to what we see in the *Vita Antonii*, new and equally worthy forms of religious life which may or may not be called ›ascetic‹.

One early example would be Martin of Tours' career, which transforms a wandering monk and hermit eating roots and grass into the founder of a community of hermits and then into a bishop who finds a compromise between representing his office and retaining his former austerity and discipline.¹³⁷ The *Vita Martini* poses the question of whether we should add the willingness to serve the Christian community, to relentlessly exorcize demons and to fight the errors of pagans to be considered part of an expanding ›ascetic‹ repertoire.¹³⁸

The singing barbarian Hymnemosus, the first protagonist of the *Vita Abbatum Acaunensium*, like Antony and Martin, goes through an ›ascetic phase‹, which he spends as a hermit in a cave.¹³⁹ Later he is admitted to a proper monastic community, becomes their abbot and subsequently founds Saint-Maurice d'Agaune, the first ›royal monastery‹, in which its monks, liturgical experts recruited from neighboring episcopal sees, were exempt from manual labor in order to dedicate themselves to incessant intercessory prayer.¹⁴⁰ Does it make sense to understand submission to a liturgical regime and serving the world through ceaseless prayer as a form of ›asceticism‹ or, again, as a ›post-ascetic‹ practice?

The *Vita* of Romanus and Lupicinus, which was written roughly at the same time as the report on Hymnemosus' conversion and the foundation of Saint-Maurice d'Agaune, describes a similar process of transformation but develops a radically different monastic ideal. Romanus and Lupicinus start their religious career by emulating Antony, moving into the desert of the Jura mountains and fighting demons,¹⁴¹ but their saintliness attracted followers and turned them into leaders of a network of monastic foundations that succeeds in finding a balance between mild austerity and accessibility to everyone who wants to pursue a monastic life which is centered around labor for the community rather than incessant prayer.¹⁴²

136 On the impact of the *Vita Antonii* on Western hagiography, see Bertrand, *Die Evagriusübersetzung der Vita Antonii*, 26-60.

137 Sulpicius Severus, *Vita Martini*, c. 6.5, ed. Fontaine, 266: on his life as a hermit; c. 10, *ibid.*, 272-274: on retaining a monastic life after being elected bishop.

138 Sulpicius Severus, *Dialogi* I, c. 24-26, ed. Fontaine and Dupré, 198-210, esp. c. 24.3, *ibid.*, 200, transl. Goodrich, *Sulpicius Severus*, 208 explicitly compares the achievements of the desert fathers with Martin's life in a ›crowd and with various peoples, among disagreeing clerics, among savage bishops, pressured from every side by near-daily scandals.‹

139 *Vita Abbatum Acaunensium*, c. 1, ed. Krusch, 330.

140 *Vita Abbatum Acaunensium*, c. 3-7, ed. Krusch, 331-334. See Diem, Who is Allowed to Pray for the King?.

141 *Vita Patrum Iurensium*, c. 6-12, ed. Martine, 244-252: Romanus' and Lupicinus' life as hermits.

142 *Vita Patrum Iurensium*, c. 13-17, ed. Martine, 254-258; c. 22-24, *ibid.*, 262-264: the foundation of the Jura monasteries. On the network of the Jura monasteries, see Fox, Swarm from the blessed hive.

The author of the *Vita patrum Iurensium* exemplifies the tensions arising from such a transformation in a conflict between Romanus and a monk who wants to evict everyone who does not meet his high standards of discipline and austerity. Romanus prevails and convinces the monk that his ideas were induced by a demon.¹⁴³ Are those monks who, often in search of healing and solace, joined the Jura monasteries in order to work in the fields and forests for the benefit of their community still to be considered ›ascetics‹?

Caesarius of Arles's high standards caused him to be evicted from Lérins – at least that's what we can read between the lines of his *Vita*.¹⁴⁴ Without compromising his ideals, he abandoned the strict life that got him into trouble with his fellow monks and almost ruined his health, in order to take on the duties of a bishop. He produced two monastic rules, neither of which showed an interest in bodily mortification. One of them imposes lifelong total enclosure and submission to a *sancta regula*; the other one places *perseuerantia* at the center of monastic existence and defines monastic life as a lifelong struggle against one's vices.¹⁴⁵ We can ask the same question here: is it more productive to view virginity, total enclosure (paired with a life of assured comfort), and submitting to a *sancta regula* a part of a new repertoire of ›asceticism‹ or as a feasible alternative to an ›ascetic‹ life?

The *Vita Benedicti*, the second book of Gregory the Great's *Dialogi*, contains yet another variation on the theme. Benedict, like Antony, begins his life as a cave-hermit who refuses to break his fasting even at Easter.¹⁴⁶ His eremitism is, again, a transitory state. As head of a monastic community he risks being killed by the monks who do not want to endure his strict regime.¹⁴⁷ Only later in his life does he become the benevolent and mild abbot of Montecassino and the author of a *Rule* that is, in Gregory's words, a rule outstanding in judgment and clear in phrasing – possibly the *Regula Benedicti* as we know it.¹⁴⁸

A last narrative of transformation to be discussed here (there are more, of course) is Jonas of Bobbio's *Vita* of the Irish *peregrinus* Columbanus, who came to the Continent about fifty years after Benedict's death.¹⁴⁹ One of his foundations, Luxeuil, became the center of a monastic network and contributed just as much to shaping medieval monasticism as did the *Regula Benedicti*.¹⁵⁰ As *monachi peregrini*, Columbanus and his followers performed what could be seen as a particularly strict form of ›asceticism‹: giving up one's home country. In an almost ironic transformation, Jonas turns Columbanus' successors Eusthasius and Waldebert into a new type of *monachi peregrini*: high-profiled negotiators who were constantly travelling back and forth between Luxeuil and its affiliations and the court in order to keep a network of Columbanian foundations intact.¹⁵¹ We could ask whether entering the snake pit of monastic politics and the – eventually failed – task of keeping a monastic network together, could be considered an ›ascetic‹ achievement.

143 *Vita patrum Iurensium*, c. 27-34, ed. Martine, 268-278.

144 *Vita Caesarii* I, c. 6-7, ed. Morin et al., 154-158.

145 Caesarius, *Regula ad uirgines*, ed. de Vogüé and Courreau, 170-272; Caesarius, *Regula ad monachos*, ed. de Vogüé and Courreau, 204-226. See Diem, *Das Monastische Experiment*, 154-202.

146 Gregory the Great, *Dialogi* II, c. 1, ed. de Vogüé and Antin, 128-136.

147 Gregory the Great, *Dialogi* II, c. 3.1-4, ed. de Vogüé and Antin, 140-142.

148 Gregory the Great, *Dialogi* II, c. 36, ed. de Vogüé and Antin, 242.

149 Jonas of Bobbio, *Vita Columbani*, ed. Krusch, 1-294; transl. O'Hara and Wood, *Jonas of Bobbio*.

150 On the impact of Columbanian monasticism, see Diem, *Pursuit of Salvation*.

151 Diem, *Monks, kings and the transformation of sanctity*.

With Columbanian monasticism, the body as an object of religious practice returns to the Latin world, though it is not the body of the desert monk submitted to self-imposed *mortificatio*. When Columbanus talks about *mortificatio* in his *Regula monachorum*, it is the *mortificatio* of the will, not of the body.¹⁵² Yet the *medicamenta paenitentiae* (remedies of penance) that allegedly returned to the Continent with Columbanus' arrival are very physical remedies.¹⁵³ There is no indication that Columbanus saw the body itself as inherently sinful or as the place of temptation, but he did make it an object of punishment and turned various practices that may be viewed as ›ascetic‹ into practices of penance: flagellation, even for small transgressions; fasting; prayer and social exclusion.¹⁵⁴ Can a practice remain ›ascetic‹ if it is undergone or imposed as a punishment or retribution in order to attain forgiveness for a sin or transgression?

It would not be difficult to find other Latin hagiographic narratives that contain both elements: the transitional phase of radical ›asceticism‹ and the propagation of new practices that form a worthy alternative.¹⁵⁵ There is, however, little of a general trend in these alternatives. The implicit critique of radical ›asceticism‹ and its placement in a distant past or a distant country thus does not lead to *one* alternative model but – in a beautiful analogy to Evagrius' Babylonian confusion of ἄσκησις – to a huge variety of options for living and rationalizing religious life.

Conclusion

Neither my very narrow exploration of the meanings of ἄσκησις in a handful of exemplary texts nor my exploration of transformations of religious practices that manifest themselves in Latin monastic rules and narratives can claim to be more than preliminary case studies. They show, however, that what we might call ›asceticism‹ encompasses a wide array of practices ranging from extreme forms of harming and neglecting one's body to exercises of controlling one's impulses, or simply doing more good than is typical. These practices are tied to an equally broad range of motivations: the imitation of martyrdom, creating Christian alternatives to non-Christian forms of virtuous or disciplined life, gaining fame and the ability to perform miracles, expressing one's love of God, fighting a war as a soldier of Christ, battling demons, fighting vices, avoiding temptations, overcoming the effects of original sin, gaining control over one's body or thoughts, gaining *discretio*, restoring purity, gaining the power to perform intercession, doing penance in order to achieve forgiveness for one's sinful impulses or sinful deeds, or preempting future punishment. Some of these motivations, in turn, may require radically different theological frameworks.

152 Columbanus, *Regula monachorum*, c. 9, ed. Walker, 138-140.

153 Jonas, *Vita Columbani* I, c. 5, ed. Krusch, 161.

154 Columbanus, *Regula coenobialis*, ed. Walker, 142-168.

155 An important Carolingian example would be the *Vita* of the monastic reformer Benedict of Aniane, who first emulated desert ›ascetics‹, then ›fell in love‹ with the *Regula Benedicti* and founded Aniane, a community of poor and austere living monks. Aniane later turned into a lavishly endowed royal monastery and Benedict became the leading monastic reformer who aimed at unifying Frankish monasticism under the *Regula Benedicti*. Benedict, thus, reinvented himself at least twice, of course without compromising his ›ascetic‹ ideals. See Ardo, *Vita Benedicti abbatis Anianensis*, ed. Waitz, 198-220. See also Diem, *Inventing the holy rule*.

Both the range of practices and the underlying motivations were, probably not much less than the grand theological questions, matters of dispute and disagreement, albeit often expressed more discreetly and under the disguise of harmony.¹⁵⁶ Antony, Athanasius, Palladius, Theodoret, Evagrius of Antioch, Cassian, Benedict, Gregory the Great, Columbanus, and Jonas of Bobbio propagated, rationalized, and defended their respective range of ›ascetic‹ practices and motivations *against* other existing models. They did it discreetly but effectively, by creating their own idiom, by re-defining expressions, by placing a claim on the *memoria* of undisputed heroes of the past, by telling stories of transformation – to mention only a few discursive techniques.

Indiscriminately calling all the practices I listed ›ascetic‹ and placing all the rationales and motivations under the umbrella of ›asceticism‹ carries the danger of ignoring diversity, obfuscating small nuances and plain incompatibilities, ignoring historical developments, and making dissent and debates invisible. It makes things that are fundamentally different look dangerously similar, unless we use ›asceticism‹ as a hermeneutic ›scratch post‹ and read our sources consistently *against* the assumption that there is something like a universal concept behind this term.

The idea that there existed a unity and an overarching principle within the diversity of Christian ›exercises‹ (to return to the classical meaning of the term ἄσκησις) is much older than the post-medieval creation of the word *asceticus* and the creation of an ›ascetical‹ canon of texts from the sixteenth century onwards, or the postulation of an ›ascetic imperative‹ in the works of Foucault and Harpham. The oldest Latin collections of *Vitae patrum* that turned the divergent voices of ›asceticism‹ into one shared imagined past fitting in one codex were produced in the Carolingian period.¹⁵⁷ The textual construction of ›asceticism‹ may have started even earlier with Jerome's and Gennadius' bio-bibliography *De uiris illustribus*, which put a stamp of orthodoxy on a canon of ›ascetic‹ works.¹⁵⁸ But it is also important to be aware that an early challenge of a shared notion of ›asceticism‹ is not much younger, appearing in the Pseudo-Gelasian *Decretum Gelasianum de libris recipiendis et non recipiendis* (probably written in the sixth century) that casts doubt on some of the works that we would consider foundational texts of Christian ›asceticism‹.¹⁵⁹

Asking whether certain forms of religious life – obedience, humility, undergoing punishment, submission under a rule, assuming civic duties, sexual continence, submitting to a strict daily routine, etc. – could be considered as conforming to a universal ›ascetic‹ principle, as I have done in the third part of this essay, causes the problem that each answer might alter a concept that is to be considered universal: To what extent does ›asceticism‹ have to

156 Brown, *Body and Society*.

157 Bertrand, *Die Evagriusübersetzung*, 89-154 and 445-504; Diem, *Das monastische Experiment*, 339-393; Schulz-Flügel, *Rufinus Historia Monachorum*, 90-142.

158 Jerome and Gennadius, *De uiris illustribus*, ed. Bernoulli.

159 *Decretum Gelasianum de libris recipiendis et non recipiendis*, ed. von Dobschütz, 7-13. The text, which defines a canon of texts to be read in church, not only condemns some of the works of Origen, and Cyprian, the works of Tertullian, the *Dialogi* of Sulpicius Severus, the works of Cassian, Victorinus and Faustus, but also calls for caution in reading the acts of the martyrs and the works of Rufinus and does not even mention the *Vita Martini* or the *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*.

involve the body? Is there a pure ›asceticism‹ of the mind? Is ›asceticism‹ necessarily a moral practice or can there be an ethically neutral ›asceticism‹? Is ›asceticism‹ by nature a voluntary, self-imposed practice, or is there an overlap between ›asceticism‹ and punishment and self-punishment? Is there ›asceticism‹ without renunciation? It might be worthwhile to turn the assumption that there is a universal concept of ›asceticism‹ into a hypothesis to be tested time and again on the sources we read. Regardless whether we come to a negative or affirmative answer, the testing itself will lead to a profusion of collateral insights that keep the excitement of studying the late antique and early medieval period alive.

References

Abbreviations

CCSL = Corpus Christianorum Series Latina

MGH SRG = Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Scriptores Rerum Germanicarum un usum scholarum

MGH SRM = Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Scriptores Rerum Merovingicarum

MGH SS = Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Scriptores

PG = Patrologiae Cursus Completus, Series Graeca, ed. Jacques-Paul Migne (Paris, 1857-1866)

SC = Sources Chrétiennes

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